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ABSTRACT

A program for tutorial assistance and tutor training at the University of Texas at Austin is described in this document. The tutorial assistance program attempts to provide help with both study skills and specific course content, since students experiencing academic difficulty in a specific course may request tutoring aid, not realizing that their approach to learning may be interfering with their mastery of the course. Two types of positions for student tutors are: tutor consultants or advisors, who interview prospective tutees, serve as paraprofessional learning specialists, and act as consultants with student tutors in their efforts in guiding a student's learning; and student tutors, who actually tutor the student in a course. Training for the tutor consultants has focused on expanding their knowledge and expertise in interviewing skills and diagnostic techniques, learning skills and teaching strategies, consultation techniques, and administrative skills. Methods for training have included workshops on selected topics of interest, weekly staff meetings, and individual weekly meetings with the director. (MKM)

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INTERFACING TUTORING AND READING PROGRAMS:

TRAINING TUTORS TO DO MY JOB

Conner Hall
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University of Texas at Austin

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When a student requests tutoring he wants help with understanding the content of a course. He often does not perceive that his way or approach to learning may be interfering with his learning. That's why he came to T.A.P.* not R.A.S.S.L.**

While he is experiencing academic difficulty in one or several courses he has problems in taking general study skills information, as offered through RASSL programming, and using it effectively in that course. "Nothing works....that works in all my other courses but this one....I don't even see how to begin with that prof and what he's covering." He came because he wants help with <u>that</u> book and <u>that</u> prof in <u>that</u> course. Therefore he seeks tutoring. Only through actually showing the student how to use a systematic approach in reading <u>that</u> text does he <u>begin</u> to understand that "it works here too."

*Tutorial Assistance Program
**Reading and Study Skills Lab

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Tutors are usually selected for the content competency they have demonstrated in a course. It is often assumed that because they mastered the material they can also teach it; because they studied effectively, they can teach others how to do the same. (It is similar to the myth that all Ph.D.'s are also good teachers.) Yet again and again the statement is made: "She asked me how to study biology -- I told her I don't know -- you just do it!" or "He understands it, works the problems, everything, and still blows the test -- I wish I could watch him take it and see what he does."

Students needing tutoring in a course need practice, reinforcement, and individual guidance through that course -- which the tutor provides. The tutoring session focuses on what he understands, what he has problems in understanding and how he has learned what he understands. The tutor has an excellent opportunity to identify strengths and weaknesses in a student's approach to studying <u>that</u> course, to make suggestions for more effective approaches with that book--prof--class, and to positively reinforce the practice of these techniques in subsequent sessions -- all while assisting him in understanding the content of the course.

The Program: What we have been doing these last seven months.....

Based on these observations and RASSL's commitment to Outreach Services--taking learning services to students where and when they are learning rather than waiting for them to seek out RASSL. I was released half time as consultant to the new Tutorial Assistance Program being established in the Dean of Students Office. Past tutoring programs offered through the Division of Student Affairs at UT-Austin have primarily been brokerage services

names of tutors recommended by departments or professors were given to students upon request. Little or no supervision or contact except for financial reasons was made with the program office.

The objectives of the new program are:

1. To help a student accessing the service to identify factors affecting his learning in that course.

2. To offer or make appropriate referrals for learning skills assistance, personal or academic advising, and/or tutoring.

3. To provide tutoring in courses from certified, trained tutors.

4. To provide supervision and training in the tutorial process.

5. To begin coordinating information and referral sources for other tutorial efforts on campus.

6. To gather data concerning the use and effectiveness of such a program.

To meet the first four objectives positions and training programs for two kinds of student tutors are evolving: (1) tutor consultants or advisors -- those who interview prospective tutees, who serve as para-professional learning specialists, and who act as consultants with student tutors in their efforts in guiding a student's learning; and (2) student tutors -- those who actually tutor the student in a course.

Training for the tutor consultants has focused on expanding their knowledge and expertise in (1) interviewing skills and diagnostic techniques, (2) learning skills and teaching strategies, (3) consultation techniques, and (4) administrative skills (students are not used to paperwork!). Methods have included workshops on selected topics of interest, weekly

staff meetings to work as a group in refining the procedures and administration of the program, individual weekly meetings with me focusing on individual concerns in working with all aspects of the program.

They worked through various study skills books and resources with an eye toward appropriateness of referrals to tutors and students as well as expanding their own knowledge of the content. They have participated in various RASSL programs to observe teaching and interviewing models, and to see how different materials can be used. They have used other resources such as the Counseling Center and the Dean of Students Office Personnel to gain a broader perspective as to how others may approach specific student predicaments (e.g., the anxious student accessing each of these offices). The fall semester concentrated on developing each individual's interviewing and consultative skills, whereas this semester the focus has been on the more complex and subtle issues such as motivation and concentration with different kinds of students and tutors, varying teaching strategies for different populations, and so forth.

The focus in training the student tutors has been on (1) working with developing their knowledge of teaching strategies and communications skills, (2) raising their awareness as to how learning occurs and approachs which can help or hinder this process, and (3) developing their sensitivity and expertise in working with such factors as lack of confidence, motivation, anxiety, and failure. We have had general tutor orientations, bimonthly small group meetings, and individual consultation (on an unplanned basis at first but now more structured) with the tutor consultants or me as interests and concerns dictated.

Topics covered have included factors affecting learning, teaching strategies to help elicit information for organizing the tutoring sessions - especially the first couple of meetings, tutor-tutee relationships, developing a student's independence in learning, anxiety--identifying and handling it (especially test anxiety), ways of teaching your students how you study, developing instructional objectives, building self-concepts, preparing for and taking tests, and other study and learning techniques. We have also had Study Problem Sessions co-led by student tutors and RASSL on specific study techniques, and on Studying for Exams in freshman level Chemistry, Physics and Calculus for tutees. There have also been subject area meetings to focus on sharing common experiences and concerns among those tutoring in the same subjects.

Some Observations and Considerations

This discussion may give an impression of organization and planning, but in actuality it has been more "catch as catch can." For the first semester the most influential modes of instruction with tutor consultants probably were individual consultation with one another or me and the materials they reviewed; for the student tutors, again, individual consultation" -- in more of a re-active mode than in a proactive fashion. The mutual sharing of experiences was the greatest plus for both kinds of tutors in these meetings.

This has been one of the major problems this year: going through the individual throes of excitement and frustration as a program moves from its inchoate state and takes on shape and form. This experience -- and trying to be in touch with both the content of the program and the process

through which it is moving -- coupled with my excitement of "what could be" have given rise again in me the following observations about training:

1. You can't really teach anyone much by "telling them how to..." Being a model, showing them or better still providing experiences that help us show one another what and how we are learning gives more opportunity for learning.

2. None of us is as good as all of us...

We all come from different experiences with the tutoring process: the "learning specialist" who worked with general techniques in reading and study skills; the tutor advisors who come in contact with all persons requesting tutoring and work in the framework of that initial contact, and who consult with the student tutors; the student tutors who work through the content with the students; and the students who are struggling to put all this "input" together in a workable form for themselves. Collaboration or joint involvement in program development, rather than "I teach--You learn" handed down through these various hierarchical levels which could exist in this program, is far superior in developing independent and motivated learners -- on <u>all</u> levels.

3. Timing is very important in learning...

Exposure, for example, to the concept of anxiety in tutoring and ways of working with it before it is encountered raises awareness of the existence of a possible predicament; however, not until the situation has actually been encountered will further discussion or amplification be meaningful.

4. The same experiences do not necessarily touch base with everyone.

We know we have individual styles in learning, and we know individual academic disciplines do also. Interestingly, where we think similarities

exist, there are subtle differences. For example, chemistry tutors do face different learning problems from calculus tutors even though both are primarily working with problem solving situations.

5. You're not hearing me...

Listening -- not just to content but to the process used in developing statements one makes -- the perspective from which that person is working - is crucial if communication and hopefully change is to occur.

6. Who to hire?????

Hiring "the person" is much more important than hiring "his credentials." There is a nondefinable openness that is essential in working in a program such as this, and it cannot be categorized on personnel classification charts.

7. Institutional commitment -- must we always ask why a tutoring program on a university campus?

This commitment is essential if a quality program is to be developed. It is difficult to motivate staff to do in-depth program development or programming with other campus offices and colleges when existence is continually in question. These concerns assume a lower priority under these circumstances. Immediate concerns take over and continuity is lost. Thus the pro-active aspects of program development can be undermined.

Perhaps the following examples will help illustrate how some of these observations have operated in this program. The topic of motivation, concentration and anxiety is of concern to each of us participating in this program, and the process through which these topics were explored is important. In initial meetings with both the tutor advisors and student tutors these topics were identified as major factors as to whether the

student meets his course demands or not, and as to whether he works well in the tutoring sessions. The tutor consultants did some initial readings in the early part of their training on ways of promoting concentration, identifying anxiety, finding motivation. However, it was not until questions began to crop up frequently from student tutors and students themselves that the tutor consultants began to become concerned with developing their knowledge and skills in working with this problem. This was expressed in individual communications among one another and to me.

In a staff meeting we brainstormed about directions for their training and then priorized topics, and this was one they wished to pursue. They proceeded to describe the situations and questions in which they found themselves uncomfortable. The focus now became finding ways of approaching this concern with different kinds of students or tutors. After completing some suggested readings, talking with student tutors, etc. we met again in a workshop to discuss ways of working with these topics. We role-played various situations they had encountered from their own experiences with the program. From this process they learned the importance of really listening and the uniqueness of each individual's experience. From this is evolving a proposed set of materials for the library and ideas for covering these concerns in subject area meetings and in individual consultation with student tutors.

Another example....In the subject area meetings for science tutors (including one of the tutor advisors and myself) we all wrote down five things we each felt it essential to do to learn the information in a freshman level science course in which we were tutoring. Each addressed himself to what he did to learn the course (chemistry, physics, geology,

etc.) himself. We shared these, and interestingly there was considerable variance in the suggestions. They commented on how much more aware of and sensitive to different learning styles they were becoming, even within their own discipline.

They had in this same process identified at least one problem or concern each was experiencing in working with one or several students. As problems were described, the tutors themselves proceeded to help one another with virtually no prodding from us. They developed alternatives for working with background weaknesses; they discussed techniques in helping the student solve his own homework problems; and they came up with suggestions for motivating a student to try new approaches -- or for that matter any approach. Several in the group were particularly effective in consulting with a tutor who was becoming defensive as he was floundering in his attempts to avoid doing the student's homework for him. They helped him question and redefine his objectives in tutoring, and suggested ways he could operate differently in the tutoring session. We coordinated the meeting and the discussion, but the tutors ran it. We all made suggestions for content and methodology to be used in the next meeting.

A final illustration. Because of scheduling problems during the first semester the tutor advisors could meet as a group for only one hour a week. It was primarily through individual conferences with me that concerns and excitements were aired, new ideas tried, and I then shared this with the others individually. There was little opportunity for cross communications among themselves as a whole group. As each grew in knowledge about learning skills and in experience in interviewing and working with the tutors, each became more and more motivated in focusing

on the tutoring and learning processes, and on making this program really viable for both tutors, students -- and themselves. (They all stated it was becoming more than just a job.) The few times we were able to meet as a whole group at the end of the semester were exciting because of the opportunity to exchange and share mutual experiences rather than primarily solving administrative questions. This process helped develop a sense of cohesion that was energized by a known mutual concern (rather than individual) with making this program really work.

We as a group began to priorize topics for training and learning as a group and individually. We as a group set priorities for procedural changes, environmental enhancement, and program development. This mutual involvement and sharing in the decision making aspects of this program has resulted in increased effort on everyone's part in all aspects of the program this semester. They are more intimately involved in the everyday workings of this program than I can be. I have other kinds of experiences related to learning and working with students. Together we are making this program effective.

We are not yet completely democratic. They still feel unsure of their own skills and abilities and often look to me for clarification and suggestions, but not nearly as much as earlier. And when they do, the questions are usually more complex (the issues of motivation, for example). They are beginning to focus on ways of working with their groups of tutors more consciously to build this same cohesiveness and collaboration into that part of this program.

The kinds of information I alone could have given any of these groups, or we could derive from consulation with one another, or have found in some

books were not nearly as extensive nor as creative as those developed in this group collaborative process. They felt the need for such input; we each have ideas as to how different experiences can be of benefit. From this sharing we as a group expanded our own awareness of other predicaments. At the same time we got ideas for developing some materials for the program library that are infinitely more thorough and helpful than anything one, or a few, of us could have compiled.

When combined, these observations help in refining both the materials and processes used in tutoring and tutor training. I want to briefly reflect upon what I would do differently this next year to enhance chances for these factors to be present (under the operational criteria imposed by UT). The purpose of this discussion is primarily to give rise to some ideas -- to which others involved in such programs can react, amplify, and create anew for themselves. It is my hope that we can share these ideas, and together develop even more effective programming for tutor training.

1. Structure more group contact for both kinds of tutors, especially earlier in the semester before programming actually begins. The sooner information-related training can be developed (before they are immersed in their respective jobs), the sooner attention can be given to more complex issues such as how, rather than what, to teach. This would also include more frequent subject area meetings as well as small heterogeneous group meetings. A course would be preferable but circumstances will not permit this at UT-Austin right now.

2. Structure more individual contact between student tutors and tutor consultants early in the semester. Once a tutor has met with a student, individual conferences could begin; this should be continued

through at least the middle part of the semester on a planned basis. We all need the concern and reinforcement individual attention can give when we are beginning a new learning experience. This helps us all keep in touch with one another, and the processes and experiences we are each coming in contact with as this program progresses.

3. Establish a training library. This will include a procedures manual, a training manual of information and ideas developed this year, tapes covering specific topics such as working with handicapped students, tutoring small groups, motivation, etc., and appropriate or related learning and teaching skills materials. The library could be accessed more readily than setting up special group or individual training sessions. Use of dialog or reaction pages with the materials would enable us to share our ideas, questions, reactions with others using the materials.

4. Develop more variety in training experiences, especially related to specific populations and subject areas. This can be done with more simulation experiences related to different individual and group concerns, bringing in more outside resources for different models of teaching -- consulting--interviewing, more use of RASSL programs for training, and so forth. These are in addition to using group and individual discussion which has been the primary method for sharing ideas.

5. Develop and refine the interviewing process for hiring student tutors. At this point we make decisions based more on how we feel about that person's potential teaching abilities and personal skills rather than any experience with these. We try to hire people we would enjoy working with who also have the necessary academic credentials -- a very undefinable process.

Many of these ideas related to the training program for tutors involve the same concepts and activities the tutors themselves find useful in tutoring students. Both of these aspects in this program focus on becoming aware of what we do -- and don't do -- to effect our own learning, and finding ways of developing our own effective learning skills for each new situation. Just as RASSL serves as one primary resource in learning about learning, so can the tutor -- and in ways which are often more relevant to the student seeking his service.

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